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THE LITERARY MOVEMENT IN IRELAND.

BY W. B. YEATS.

I HAVE just come to a quiet Connaught house from seeing a movement of thought, which may do much to fashion the dreams of the next generation in Ireland, grow to a sudden maturity. Certain plays, which are an expression of the most characteristic ideals of what is sometimes called "the Celtic movement," have been acted in Dublin before audiences drawn from all classes and all political sections, and described at such length in every Nationalist newspaper, that the people in the cottages here in this quiet place are talking about them over the fire. Whatever be the merit of these plays, and that must be left to the judgment of time, their success means, as I think, that the "Celtic movement," which has hitherto interested but a few cultivated people, is about to become a part of the thought of Ireland.

Before 1891, Unionists and Nationalists were too busy keeping one or two simple beliefs at their fullest intensity for any complexity of thought or emotion; and the national imagination uttered itself, with a somewhat uncertain energy, in a few stories and in many ballads about the need of unity against England, about the martyrs who had died at the hand of England, or about the greatness of Ireland before the coming of England. They built up Ireland's dream of Ireland, of an ideal country weighed down by immemorial sorrows and served by heroes and saints; and they taught generations of young men to love their country with a love that was the deepest emotion they were ever to know; but they built with the virtues and beauties and sorrows and hopes that would move to tears the greatest number of those eyes before whom the modern world is but

beginning to unroll itself; and, except when some rare, personal impulse shaped the song according to its will, they built to the formal and conventional rhythm which would give the most immediate pleasure to ears that have forgotten Gaelic poetry, and have not yet learned the subtleties of English poetry. The writers who made this literature or who shaped its ideals, in the years before the great famine, lived at the moment when the middle class had brought to perfection its ideal of the good citizen, and of a politics and a philosophy and a literature which would help him upon his way; and they made a literature full of the civic virtues, and, in all but its unbounded patriotism, without inconvenient ardors. They took their style from Scott and Campbell and Macaulay, and that "universally popular" poetry which is really the poetry of the middle class, and from Beranger and that "peasant poetry" which looks for its models to the Burns of "Highland Mary" and "The Cottar's Saturday night." Here and there a poet or a story-writer found an older dream among the common people or in his own mind, and made a personality for himself; and got shoved away and forgotten; for everybody wanted to be moved by the same emotions as everybody else; and nobody who understands how much self-sacrifice is the shadow of their desire will blame it.

II.

The fall of Parnell and the wreck of his party and of the organizations that supported it, were the symbols, if not the causes, of a sudden change. They were followed by movements and organizations that brought the ideas and the ideals which are the expression of personalities into Irish political, economic and literary interests. Those who looked for the old energies, which were the utterance of the common will and hope, were unable to see that a new kind of Ireland, as full of energy as a boiling pot, was rising up amid the wreck of the old kind, and that the national life was finding a new utterance. May be, the hand that broke the ball of glass, that now lies in fragments full of a new iridescent life, obeyed some impulse from beyond its wild and capricious will. More books about Irish subjects have been published in these last eight years than in the thirty years that went before them, and these books have the care for scholarship and the precision of speech which had been notor-

iously lacking in books on Irish subjects. An appeal to the will, a habit of thought which measures all beliefs by their intensity, is content with a strenuous rhetoric; but an appeal to the intellect needs an always more perfect knowledge, an always more malleable speech. The new writers and the organizations they work through—for organizations of various kinds take the place held by the critical press in other countries—have awakened Irish affections among many from whom the old rhetoric could never have got a hearing, but they have been decried as weakening the national faith by lovers of the old rhetoric. I have seen an obscure Irish member of Parliament rise at one of those monthly meetings of the Irish Literary Society when the members of the society read their poems to one another, and ask leave to read a poem. He did not belong to the society, but leave was given him, and he read a poem in the old manner, blaming the new critics and praising the old poems which had made him patriotic and filled his imagination with the images of the martyrs, and, as he numbered over their names, Wolfe Tone, Emmet, Owen Roe, Sarsfield, his voice shook and many were angry with the new critics.

The organizations that are making this change are the Irish Literary Society in London, the National Literary Society in Dublin, which has just founded the Irish Literary Theatre, and the Feis Ceoil Committee in Dublin, at whose annual series of concerts of Irish music, singers and pipers from all parts of Ireland compete; and the Gaelic League, which has worked for the revival of the Gaelic language with such success that it has sold fifty thousand of its Gaelic text books in a year. All these organizations have been founded since the fall of Parnell; and all are busy in preserving, or in moulding anew, and without any thought of the politics of the hour, some utterance of the national life, and in opposing the vulgar books and the music-hall songs, that keep pouring in from England. All but the Gaelic League, which considers language and nationality inseparable, use the English language, preparing, as some think, for a day when Ireland will speak in Gaelic, almost as much as Wales speaks in Welsh, within her borders, but speak in English to other nations of those truths which were committed to her when "He set the borders of the nations according to His angels;" and, as it seems, believing that the use of English, now it has become the

language of so different countries, need no more make Irishmen think like Englishmen than did the use of Latin make the lettered classes of the Middle Ages think like Romans. But this is a dispute which concerns ourselves principally; for what concerns others is that a new kind of romance, a new element in thought, is being perhaps moulded out of Irish life and traditions, and that this element may have an importance for criticism, even should criticism forget the writers who are trying to embody it in their work, while looking each one through his own color in the dome of many-colored glass.

III.

Contemporary English literature takes delight in praising England and her Empire, the master-work and dream of the middle class; and, though it may escape from this delight, it must long continue to utter the ideals of the strong and wealthy. Irish intellect has always been pre-occupied with the weak and with the poor, and now it has begun to collect and describe their music and stories, and to utter anew the beliefs and hopes which they alone remember. It may never make a literature pre-occupied with the circumstance of their lives, like the "peasant poetry," whose half deliberate trivality, passionless virtue and passionless vice has helped so many orderly lives; for a writer who wishes to write with his whole mind must knead the beliefs and hopes, which he has made his own, with the circumstance of his own life. Burns had this pre-occupation, and nobody will deny that he was a great poet; but even he had the poverty of emotions and ideas of a peasantry that had lost, like the middle class into which it would have its children absorbed, the imagination that is in tradition without finding the imagination that is in books. Irish literature may prolong its first inspiration without renouncing the complexity of ideas and emotions which is the inheritance of cultivated men, for it will have learned from the discoveries of modern learning that the common people, wherever civilization has not driven its plough too deep, keep a watch over the roots of all religion and all romance. Their poetry trembles upon the verge of incoherence with a passion unknown among our poets, and their sense of beauty exhausts itself in countless legends and in metaphors that seem to mirror the energies of nature.

Dr. Hyde has collected much old Irish peasant love-poetry, and, like all primitive poetry, it foreshadows the unmeasured emotion, the ideal passion, of poetry whose intensity of emotion, or strangeness of language, has made it the poetry of little coteries. His peasant lover cries:

"It is happy for you, O blind man, who do not see much of women.
O! if you were to see what I see, you would be sick even as I am.
It is a pity, O God, that it was not blind I was before I saw her twisted hair.

I always thought the blind were pitiable, until my calamity grew beyond the grief of all,

Then though it is a pity I turned my pity into envy.

In a loop of the loops in a loop am I.

It is sorrow for whoever has seen her, and it is sorrow for him who does not see her every day.

It is sorrow for him who is tied in the knot of her love, and it is sorrow for him who is loosed out of it.

It is sorrow for him who is near her, and it is sorrow for him who is not near her."

Or, he cries:

"O, Maurya! you are my love, and the love of my heart is your love—
Love that is without littleness, without weakness,
Love from age till death,
Love growing out of folly,
Love that will send me close beneath the clay,
Love without a hope of the world,
Love without envy of fortune,
Love that has left me withered in captivity,
Love of my heart beyond women;
And a love such as that, it is seldom to be got from any man."

Or, he cries:

"My love, O, she is my love,
The woman who is most for destroying me,
Dearer is she for making me ill than the woman who would be for making me well.

She is my treasure, O she is my treasure,
The woman of the gray eyes.

A woman who would not lay a hand under my head.

She is my love, O she is my love,

The woman who left no strength in me;

A woman who would not breathe a sigh after me,

A woman who would not raise a stone at my tomb.

She is my secret love, O she is my secret love.

A woman who tells me nothing.

A woman who does not remember me to be out.

She is my choice, O she is my choice,

The woman who would not look back at me,

The woman who would not make peace with me.

She is my desire, O she is my desire:
A woman dearest to me under the sun,
A woman who would not pay me heed if I were to sit by her side.
It is she ruined my heart and left a sigh for ever in me."

All are not like this, but the most inspired and, as I think, the most characteristic are like this. There is a square stone tower called Ballylee Castle, a couple of miles from where I am writing. A farmer called Hynes, who had a beautiful daughter, Mary Hynes, lived near it some sixty years ago; and, all over the country side, songs are still sung in her honor, and old men and old women still talk of her beauty. The songs are not very good, for Gaelic poetry has fallen from its old greatness, but they come out of the same dreams as the songs and legends—as vague, it may be, as the clouds of evening and of dawn, that became in Homer's mind the memory and the prophecy of all the sorrows that have beset and shall beset the journey of beauty in the world. A very old woman who remembers her said to me, and to a friend who was with me, "I never saw one so handsome as she was, and I never will until I die. There were people coming from all parts to look at her, and maybe some of them forgot to say, 'God bless her.'*" Any way, she was young when she died, and my mother was at her funeral, and as to whether she was taken, well, there's others have been taken that were not handsome at all, and so its likely enough she might have been, for there is no one to be seen at all that is handsome like she was." The old woman sang us a song, too, that Raftery, a famous poet in his time, made in Irish, and it told how he had met her on the road, and after that "travelled the hills and the mountains of Ireland, but could never see one that was like her," and that. "it would take a thousand clerks to write down all her ways!" The spirit of Helen moves indeed among the legends that are told about turf-fires, and among the legends of the poor and simple everywhere. A friend of mine was told awhile ago, in a remote part of Donegal, of a young man who saw a light before him on the road, and found when he came near that it was from a lock of hair in an open box. The hair was so bright that, when he went into the stable where he slept, he put the box into a hole in the wall and had no need of a candle. After many wanderings

*They should have said "God bless her," so that their admiration might not give the faeries power over her.

he found her, from whose head it had been taken, and after many adventures married her and reigned over a kingdom.

The peasant remembers such songs and legends, all the more, it may be, because he has thought of little but cows and sheep and the like in his own marriage, for his dream has never been entangled by reality. The beauty of women is mirrored in his mind, as the excitement of the world is mirrored in the minds of children, and like them he thinks nothing but the best worth remembering. The child William Blake said to somebody, who had told him of a fine city, that he thought no city fine that had not walls of gold and silver. It may be that poetry is the utterance of desires that we can only satisfy in dreams, and that, if all our dreams were satisfied, there would be no more poetry. Dreams pass from us with childhood, because we are so often told they can never come true; and because we are taught with so much labor to admire the paler beauty of the world. The children of the poor and simple learn from their unbroken religious faith, and by their traditional beliefs, and by the hardness of their lives, that this world is nothing, and that a spiritual world, where all dreams come true, is everything; and therefore the poor and simple are that imperfection whose perfection is genius. The most of us think that all things, when imagined in their perfection, that all the images which emotion desires in its intensity, are among the things nobody has ever seen or shall ever see; and so we are always reminding one another not to go too far from the moderation of reality.

But the Irish peasant believes that the utmost he can dream was once or still is a reality by his own door. He will point to some mountain and tell you that some famous hero or beauty lived and sorrowed there, or he will tell you that *Tir-nan-og*, the country of the young, the old Celtic paradise, the Land of the Living Heart, as it used to be called, is all about him. An old woman close by Ballylee Castle said to a friend of mine the other day, when someone had finished a story of the poet Ush-*een's* return from *Tir-nan-og*, where he had lived with his fairy mistress: "Tir-nan-og? That place is not far from us. One time I was in the chapel of Labane, and there was a tall thin man sitting next to me, and he dressed in gray; and after the mass I asked him where he came from. 'From Tir-nan-og,' said he.

‘And where is that?’ I asked him. ‘It’s not far from you,’ he said. ‘It’s near the place where you live.’ I remember well the look of him, and he telling me that. The priest was looking at us while we were talking together.”

There are many grotesque things near at hand, the dead doing their penance in strange shapes, and evil spirits with terrible and ugly shapes, but people of a perfect beauty are never far off; and this beauty is often, I know not how often, that heroic beauty “which changes least from youth to age,” and which has faded from modern painting and poetry before a fleeting voluptuous beauty. One old Mayo woman, who can neither read nor write, described it to me, though with grotesque comparisons. She has been long in service, and her language has not the simplicity of those who live among fields. She was standing in the window of her master’s house, looking out toward a mountain where Queen Maeve, the Queen of the Western Spirits, is said to have been buried, when she saw “the finest woman you ever saw” travelling right across from the mountain and straight to her. The woman had a sword by her side and a dagger lifted up in her hand, and was dressed in white, with bare arms and feet. She looked “very strong and warry and fierce, but not wicked;” that is, not cruel, at all. The old woman had seen the Irish giant, and “though he was a fine man, he was nothing to this woman, for he was round, and could not have stepped out so soldierly.” “She was like Mrs. ——,” naming a stately lady of the neighborhood, “but she had no stomach on her and was slight and broad in the shoulders, and was handsomer than anyone you ever saw now; she looked about thirty.” The old woman covered her eyes with her hands, and when she uncovered them the apparition had vanished. The neighbors were “wild” with her for not waiting to see if there was a message, for they are sure it was Queen Maeve, who often shows herself to the pilots. I asked the old woman if she had seen others like Queen Maeve, and she said: “Some of them have their hair down, but they look quite different, like the sleepy-looking ladies you see in the papers. Those with their hair up are like this one. The others have long white dresses, but those with their hair up have short dresses so that you can see their legs right up to the calf.” After some careful questioning I found that they wore what appeared to be buskins. She went on: “They

are fine and dashing-looking, like the men one sees riding their horses in twos and threes on the slopes of the mountains, with their swords swinging." She repeated over and over, "There is no such race living now, none so fine proportioned," or the like, and then said: "The present queen is a nice, pleasant-looking woman, but she is not like her. What makes me think so little of the ladies is that I see none as they be," meaning the spirits; "when I think of her and of the ladies now, they are like little children running about, without being able to put their clothes on right. Is it the ladies? Why, I would not call them women at all!"

There are many old heroical tales about Queen Maeve, and before she was a queen she was a goddess and had her temples, and she is still the most beautiful of the beautiful. A young man among the Burren hills of Clare told me, a couple of years ago, that he remembered an old poet who had made his poems in Irish, and had met in his youth one who had called herself Queen Maeve, and asked him if he would have money or pleasure. He said he would have pleasure, and she gave him her love for a time, and then went from him and ever after he was very sad. The young man had often heard him sing a lamentation he had made, but could only remember that it was "very mournful" and called her "Beauty of all Beauty."

Many, perhaps most, of those that I have talked with of these things have all their worldly senses, but those who have most knowledge of these things, so much that they are permitted, it is thought, to speak but broken words, are those from whom the earthly senses have fallen away. "In every household" of the spirits even, there is "a queen and a fool, and, maybe, the fool is the wisest of all." This fool, who is held to wander in lonely places and to bewitch men out of the world—for the touch of the queen and of the fool are deadly—is the type of that old wisdom from which the good citizen and the new wisdom have led the world away, forgetting that "the ruins of time build mansions in eternity." The poetry that comes out of the old wisdom must turn always to religion and to the law of the hidden world, while the poetry of the new wisdom must not forget politics and the law of the visible world; and between these poetries there cannot be any lasting peace. Those that follow the old wisdom must not shrink too greatly from the journey de-

scribed in some verses which Miss Hopper, the latest poet of our school,* has put into the mouth of Dalua, the faery fool:

"The world wears on to sundown, and love is lost or won,
But he recks not of loss or gain, the King of Ireland's son.
He follows on for ever when all your chase is done,
He follows after shadows, the King of Ireland's son."

Alone among nations, Ireland has in her written Gaelic literature, in her old love tales and battle tales, the forms in which the imagination of Europe uttered itself before Greece shaped the tumult of legend into her music of the arts; and she can discover, from the beliefs and emotions of her common people, the habit of mind that created the religion of the muses. The legends of other European countries are less numerous, and not so full of the energies from which the arts and our understanding of their sanctity arose, and the best of them have already been shaped into plays and poems. The Celt, as it seems, created romance, when his stories of Arthur and of the Grail became for a time almost the only inspiration of European literature, and it would not be wonderful if he should remould romance after its most ancient image, now that he is recovering his ancient possessions.

IV.

The movement of thought which has made the good citizen, or has been made by him, has surrounded us with comfort and safety, and with vulgarity and insincerity. Churches which have substituted a system of morals for spiritual ardor; pictures which have substituted conventionally pretty faces for the disquieting revelations of sincerity; poets who have set the praises of those things good citizens think praiseworthy above a dangerous delight in beauty for the sake of beauty, are a part of its energy and its weariness. The Romantic movement from the times of Blake and Shelley and Keats, when it took a new form, has been battling with the thoughts of the good citizen, as moss and ivy and grass battle with some old building, crumbling its dead stone and mortar into the living greenery of earth. The disorders of a Shelley, or a French romanticist of our own time, in art, and in their lives that mirror their art, may be but a too impetuous ardor of battle, a too swift leaping of ivy or of grass

*The reader will find, in the collection of recent poems by Miss Hopper which immediately follows this article, a most attractive illustration of the theme discussed by Mr. Yeats in such an interesting manner.—EDITOR N. A. R.

to window ledge or gable end; and the intensity and strangeness of a painting by Rossetti or by Watts is but a sudden falling of stones. Moss and ivy and grass gather against stone and mortar in unceasing enmity, for, while the old is crumbling, the new is building; and the Romantic movement will never have perfect victory unless, as mystics have thought, the golden age is to come again, and men's hearts and the weather to grow gentle as time fades into eternity. Blake said that all art was a labor to bring that golden age, and we call romantic art romantic because it has made that age's light dwell in the imaginations of a little company of studious persons.

Because the greater number of persons are too busy with the work of the world to forget the light of the sun, romantic art is, as I think, about to change its manner and become more like the art of the old poets, who saw the golden age and their own age side by side like substance and shadow. Ever since Christianity turned men's minds to Judea, and learning turned them to Greece and Rome, the sanctity has dwindled from their own hills and valleys, which the legends and beliefs of fifty centuries had filled so full of it that a man could hardly plough his fields or follow his sheep upon the hillside without remembering some august story, or walking softly lest he had divine companions. When the valleys and the hills had almost become clay and stone, the good citizens plucked up their heart and took possession of the world and filled it with their little compact thoughts; and romance fled to more and more remote fairylands, and forgot that it was ever more than an old tale which nobody believes. But now we are growing interested in our own countries, and discovering that the common people in all countries that have not given themselves up to the improvements and devices of good citizens, which we call civilization, still half understand the sanctity of their hills and valleys; and at the same time a change of thought is making us half ready to believe with Ecclesiasticus that "all things are made double one above another," and that the forms of nature may be temporal shadows of realities.

In a little time, places may begin to seem the only hieroglyphs that cannot be forgotten, and poets to remember that they will come the nearer the old poets, who had a seat at every hearth, if they mingle their own dream with a story told for centuries of some mountain, that casts its shadows upon many

doors, and if they understand that the beauty they celebrate is a part of the paradise men's eyes shall look upon when they close upon the world. The paradise of the Christian, as those who think more of the order of communities than of the nature of things have shaped it, is but the fulfilment of one dream; but the paradise that the common people tell of about the fire, and still half understand, is the fulfilment of all dreams, and opens its gates as gladly to the perfect lover as to the perfect saint, and only he who understands it can lift romance into prophecy and make beauty holy. Their paradise, Tir-nan-og, the Land of the Living Heart, the Grass Green Island of Apples, call it what you will, created that religion of the muses which gave the arts to the world; and those countries whose traditions are fullest of it and of the sanctity of places, may yet remould romance till it has become a covenant between intellectual beauty and the beauty of the world. We cannot know how many these countries are, until the new science of folklore and the almost new science of mythology have done their work; but Ireland, if she can awake again the but half forgotten legends of Slieve Gullion, or of Cruachmagh, or of the hill where Maive is buried, and make them an utterance of that desire to be at rest amid ideal perfection, which is becoming conscious in the minds of poets as the good citizen wins the priests over to his side; or if she can make us believe that the beautiful things that move us to awe, white lilies among dim shadows, windy twilights over gray sands, dewy and silent places among hazel trees by still waters, are in truth, and not in phantasy alone, the symbols, or the dwellings, of immortal presences, she will have begun a change that, whether it is begun in our time, or not for centuries, will some day make all lands holy lands again.

V.

Ireland has no great wealth, no pre-occupation with successful persons to turn her writer's eyes to any lesser destiny. Even the poetry which had its form and much of its matter from alien thought dwelt, as the Gaelic ballads had done before it, on ideas living in the perfection of hope, on visions of unfulfilled desire, and not on the sordid compromise of success. The popular poetry of England celebrates her victories, but the popular poetry of Ireland remembers only defeats and defeated persons. A

ballad that is in every little threepenny and sixpenny ballad book, asks if Ireland has no pride in her Lawrences and Wellingtons, and answers that these belong to the Empire and not to Ireland, whose "heart beats high" for men who died in exile or in prison; and this ballad is a type of all. The popular poetry, too, has made love of the earth of Ireland so much a part of her literature, that it should not be a hard thing to fill it with the holiness of places. Politics are, indeed, the forge in which nations are made, and the smith has been so long busy making Ireland according to His will, that she may well have some important destiny. But, whether this is so or not, whether this destiny is to make her in the arts, as she is in politics, a voice of the idealism of the common people, who still remember the dawn of the world, or to give her an unforeseen history, it can but express the accidents and energies of her past, and criticism does its natural work in trying to prophesy this expression; and, even if it is mistaken, a prophecy is not always made all untrue by being unfulfilled. A few years will decide if the writers of Ireland are to shape themselves in our time for the fulfilment of this prophecy, for need and much discussion will bring a new national agreement, and the political tumult will awake again.

W. B. YEATS.